



Combat stress unit treats Iraq soldiers for psychological wounds

BOSTON (AP) -- The members of the 883rd Medical Company treat the kinds of wounds you can't see, but wounds that can be just as damaging as physical injuries.

This "combat stress control" unit goes where the soldiers are, into their tents, dining halls and chapels to offer counseling, advice and sometimes a willing ear to a soldier who may be suffering from anxiety, depression, insomnia and a host of other psychological problems associated with combat.

The unit is made up of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and other mental health workers, all trying to ease the stress for soldiers on the front lines of battle in Iraq.

The issue has received special attention since Marine Sgt. Daniel Cotnoir was charged with shooting into a rowdy crowd in Lawrence last weekend, injuring two people. Cotnoir's lawyer has said he was receiving psychological counseling after serving eight months in Iraq. A mortician by trade, he retrieved the bodies of dead U.S. soldiers.

Members of the 883rd head to Iraq on Friday for a second deployment. The unit, which spent three months in Iraq in 2003, had a farewell ceremony at its Boston headquarters Thursday.

Staff Sgt. Robert Davis, 30, of Newton, a mental health technician, said he saw many soldiers who had anxiety and trouble sleeping, conditions magnified- by the mobile nature of the war, as soldiers are frequently told to move from one location to another.

Davis said the unit offered counseling to members of a squad who had watched horrified as their leader was killed by anti-aircraft gunfire.

"They were trying to cope not only with losing a leader and a friend, but they had also witnessed his death in a rather horrific' way," Davis said.

Col. John Looper, a psychiatrist who runs an inpatient unit at a psychiatric hospital in Belmont and teaches at Harvard Medical School, said he saw "a variety of reactions to a variety of really, gruesome and horrible things" during the unit's first Iraq deployment.

"I think really the big thing was just the uncertainty of how long they were going to be there," Looper said.

The 883rd, which started as a malaria control unit during World War II, is one of nine combat stress units the Army has sent to Iraq. The unit also served in Kuwait during the Persian Gulf War.

At the farewell ceremony Thursday, U.S. Rep. Martin Meehan, D-Lowell, discussed the importance of mental health counseling for soldiers, both while they are serving in combat and after they return home.

Meehan has filed legislation to create a public awareness campaign and require every returning serviceman to receive a thorough psychological examination along with a physical exam.

The previous article also ran in:

*The Daily Hampshire Gazette
Northampton, MA*

*The Westfield Evening News
Westfield, MA*

